

Sardis: Are You Dead or Alive?

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Date: 19 February 2023

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Revelation chapter 3. I'm going to continue our series on the seven letters. So look with me there. Revelation chapter 3. I'm again reading in verse 1.

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die. For I have not found your works complete in the sight of God.

[1 : 14] Remember then what you received and heard. Keep it and repent.

If you will not wake up, I will come as a thief. And you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

Yet, you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.

I will confess his name before my father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[2 : 23] May God bless the preaching and the hearing of his word. Humor is a wonderful gift in the monotony of life.

A good joke, a funny story is a tremendous gift. And yet, sometimes the best humor is unintentional. One of the things I regularly find humorous are warnings we see every day.

Have you ever noticed on a McDonald's cup of coffee, it reads, Warning, contents hot. Apparently, they had a lawsuit on that one.

You know, have you ever read the label in a foldable stroller? It just says, Warning, remove child before folding. This is one of my favorites.

Have you ever passed a Chipotle truck on the interstate? If you look closely, it reads, Warning, drivers do not carry burritos.

[3 : 36] Apparently, there was a holdup, and it did not elicit burritos. Some dryers include the warning, Do not use while sleeping.

Wonder which teenage girl tried that one out. One of New Holland's skidsters includes the warning, one of my favorites. It just says, the warning says, now this will get your attention, Avoid death, all caps.

Avoid death. Before unbuckling seat belt and leaving seat, lower lift arm to the ground. Stop engine, lock, park, brake, and remove key. Now, that's a mouthful.

But the picture is even better. It shows a man jumping out of the cab to the front with the, gosh, the lift arm crashing down on his back.

Avoid, don't be like that guy. You don't have to die that way, you know? It's just begging you. Put it in park before you open the door.

[4 : 40] Unbuckle your seat belt. Well, in a world of so many seemingly pointless warnings, the seven letters of revelation include a number of startlingly serious warnings.

This is not a section of Scripture to play fast and loose with. Jesus says, repent or I'll close the church. Repent or I'll war against you with the sword.

He said, I didn't come to bring peace but a sword. Now he's going to bring it against his people. Repent, I'll strike you dead. Hold on to what I have given you or else you will not conquer. And we may be wondering, why? What do we do with all these warnings? How do we understand these? Aren't we saved by grace? Isn't it once saved, always saved? These warnings can leave the impression we're not careful that salvation is based on what we do for God. How can that be? Well, it's very important to understand how these warnings are meant to function.

[5 : 45] The New Testament does not just motivate us to godliness with promises of reward. The New Testament also motivates us to godliness with warnings of death and destruction.

In the same way that we gain eternal life by embracing the promises of reward, we also avoid eternal destruction by heeding the warnings.

Tom Schreiner, a New Testament scholar, says, I have argued that the warnings and admonitions, that's just cautions, in the scriptures have a particular function. By them, believers are warned against departing from Christ and the gospel.

It is by means of taking the warning seriously that the promise of our salvation is secured. So it's not as if these warnings kind of present the option of falling out of the faith.

It's actually the warnings that God uses to press you on in the faith. These warnings are not commands to be kept perfectly or tests to be passed sufficiently. They're admonitions.

[6 : 49] They're cautions. Nobody accused a stop sign for pushing them around. It protected them from destruction. And so too, that's what's going on here.

The warnings are to be heeded. And they're part of what God is using, according to Revelation, to help the church in every age persevere.

This morning, our text includes the most serious warning in the seven letters. Jesus criticizes the church in Sardis in a way that's more serious than any other criticism.

He says, you have a reputation for godliness. You have a good name, a status. But there's actually nothing there. There's no life there.

So in a word where we're going, the church must have more than a good reputation. It must have a deep, spirit-empowered life. Church must have more than a good reputation.

[7 : 58] It must have a deep, spirit-empowered life. We're going to break this out in three points.

The first, the appearance of godliness. The appearance and godliness. Each of the other letters includes an encouragement.

Even churches that he had serious concerns about, each of the other letters begins with an encouragement. But not this one, to Sardis. Look in verse 1. He says, halfway through, he says, I know your works.

Now that's, again, a reminder that Jesus Christ might be high and lifted up, but his knowledge of what is going on in the universe, in the heart of every human being in the universe, is perfect.

And so he knows. He says, you have a reputation of being alive, but you're dead. Literally, you have a name of being alive, a name of life.

You have a title. Now, we don't have a marquee or a building to go with a marquee, but hopefully one day we do.

[9 : 05] So he's saying to Sardis, you have a title. You have the first church in Sardis. You have a status. Everyone knows you as a Sunday-going, church-going kind of guy.

You have a reputation. Everyone knows you as a follower of Christ, but you are dead. But it wasn't always that way.

Look in verse 2. He says, wake up, strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I've not found your works complete in the sight of God. Your works are not complete.

They're not full. You know, and we must not miss what is going on here. He's saying, you started out following me. You set out to gain eternal life. You purposed to guard your heart, but you stopped.

You didn't keep going. You've fallen asleep. Now, this is very important. Notice, the danger in Sardis is not Jewish people slandering the church like it was in Smyrna.

[10 : 11] The danger in Sardis is not false teachers who've snuck in and seduced the church like Thyatira and Pergamum. The danger in Sardis is peace. The church in Sardis is not facing slander or threats or opposition that we know of.

The church in Sardis is experiencing peace. And surely the peace gave way to wonderful things at first, to gathering, to prayer, to fellowship, to giving. But gradually their peace began to lead to spiritual death.

Peace did not turn to heresy. It didn't turn to heterodoxy or believing untrue things about God.

Peace led to hypocrisy.

Their godliness turned into a show, a front, a facade, a veneer.

Their Christianity turned into a way of talking, a way of acting, a weekend commitment. In the end, they lost the inward heart of godliness and had only its appearance, as Paul warns in 2 Timothy 3.

[11:37] How does peace turn to hypocrisy? Surely peace is a good thing. How does it turn into hypocrisy?

Well, peace turns to hypocrisy when it's received mainly as a time for pleasure. Peace turns to hypocrisy when it turns into, or is received mainly as a time for pleasure.

The Puritans, the old guys, the old guys in the faith, they used to say there are two tests for the Christian life. The test of adversity, that's one we all know very well. Cancer, mom dies, whatever. The piece of adversity, but there's also, or the test of adversity, there's also a test of prosperity. The Puritans would say, if you want to pray for one of the tests, pray for the adversity. Because most people fail the test of prosperity.

The second is hardest. Peace and prosperity are hard, not because they're physically hard, but because they're spiritually deadening. Peace and prosperity are hard because it doesn't take long for the cares of this world to choke out the word of God, as we saw in the parable of the soil.

[12:46] For the love of comfort, pleasure, rest, and ease to put us to sleep. Just got done reading this volume on Martin Lloyd-Jones, the first volume in his biography.

He was a preacher, a Welsh preacher, but I guess was famous for preaching in London. When he began preaching, he was very concerned about what was going on in his home country in Wales. If you know anything about revivals, we've been talking about it this week. There was a huge Welsh revival in 1905. But when Lloyd-Jones began preaching in 1925 or 1927, he was very concerned about what was going on in Wales.

He's saying they've already lost it. They've already lost the revival spirit that marked that nation.

And so his very first message in his home country was called the sign of the times.

And this is not about Mark 13 or Matthew 24. He listed out eight different ways in which the church is turning away. He said the church is turning away in newspaper and advertising.

[13:54] Turning away in nationalism. Turning away in its own character as church. It's turning away in dress. Strong words for men and women in the way they dress.

He said it's even turning away in bathing. I had to include this. I thought it was funny. He said the modern method of installing a shower in each house is not only a tragedy, but a real curse on humanity.

He even said if I had to choose between living with a partner, living with a wife who showered once a day or once a year, I would have to choose the latter. Because her soul is more important than her body is what he said.

Now I hope you disagree with him about bathing. Especially all you 12 to 14 year old boys. But the point is true.

John Flavel says it well. Outward gains are ordinarily attended with inward losses. Outward gains are ordinarily attended with inward losses.

[15:07] Most of the time, comfort, pleasure, rest, and ease put us spiritually to sleep. I'll never forget years ago, I was an unbeliever.

I must have gotten saved just like a year after Lauren. Two years. I was an unbeliever and went back home to a deputation ball. So I escorted a girl to a deputation ball.

And I was at one of these parties for the occasion. And saw one of my mom's Bible study friends.

Now I was very familiar with all the women that were my mom's Bible study friends.

Because I avoided them in public. Lest they see anything I was doing. Because it went right back to mom. But this night. Her Bible study friend.

Was so drunk. That she needed my shoulder to stand up. Now, keep in mind, I was a very carnal man at that point.

[16:18] But I'll never forget the hatred. I mean, not hatred, but how appalling I saw this person.

Who for my whole life has said, I'm a believer. Leaning on my shoulder. Often, we don't really see hypocrisy for what it is.

And surely it didn't begin that way with this lady. And yet, it got that way where it was just a show. Most of us are experiencing the test of prosperity right now.

We are at peace. There's no war on our doorstep like Ukraine. No present threat of following Christ. No present threat of death. We are prosperous.

We live in the most prosperous country in the history of the world. We don't lack food, water, shelter, money. What's it producing? Are we still spiritually awake?

[17 : 38] Do we still long for the word? You know, I look back to those 21 years ago. And the longing for the word. I was like a little child longing for a mother's milk. Do we thirst for God?

Do we hunger for a sense of God? And it is grace. Grace. Grace. I read this quote, or heard it read to me, I guess, a couple months ago.

Andrew Bonar, a preacher in Scotland. On the day of his ordination, someone said to him, remember that very few men and very few ministers keep up the edge to the end that was on their spirit at the first.

I think that's what this passage is getting at is. Have we lost the edge? Very few men keep to the end the edge that was on their spirit at first. And so wonderfully, Jesus says, wake up. Strengthen what remains. Don't let your peace put you to sleep. Don't let your peace lead you to believe you're secure. Don't let your peace cause you to be taken off guard.

[18 : 45] Get out of bed. Strengthen what remains. The church must have more than a good reputation. It must have a deep, spiritually empowered life. Point to the path of godliness. The path of godliness.

After criticizing them for having only the appearance, Jesus urges them to return to the path of godliness. Look at verse 3. He says, remember then what you receive, keep it and repent. Remember what you receive, keep it and repent. This verse is held together by three commands. The whole passage includes five commands, but this verse includes three. Remember, keep and repent.

One of these commands is meant to be obeyed one time, full stop, for all time. Repent. Repent. You know, I feel like we hear this word repent so much.

We've heard a lot in these letters that I fear that it's one of those words that have been turned upside down and all of its meaning has come out. We fail to realize the tremendous mercy contained in here to the church that's spiritually dead.

[19 : 46] Jesus does not say to the church that receives the greatest criticism from the Lord Jesus. He does not say, that's it. Time's up. He says, repent and turn back to me.

So we're to obey that one time, full out. The second, two commands are to be continually obeyed. He says, remember what you received and heard.

Remember what you received. The idea is remember that what you received is meant to have a lasting impact on your life. Remember and hold fast to it. He continues, keep it, observe it, protect it, guard it.

The Lord Jesus is calling us to wake up and respond. To put forth effort without which we will not endure. D.A. Carson says, One of the most striking evidences of sinful human nature lies in the universal propensity of downward drift.

In other words, it takes thought, resolve, energy, and effort to bring about reform. Now we who believe that we're saved by grace alone, if we're not careful, effort becomes a four-letter word.

[21 : 14] But it ought not be. Jesus is trying to urge us into effort. We as a church, we believe in the absolute sovereignty of God over all things, full stop.

But we also believe that men and women are held responsible for how they respond, embrace, remember, keep, guard, and persevere in the faith. And so Jesus is kind of trying to shock us awake.

Trying to lay the presses on our chest to say, come on, wake up and fight. The verse concludes with a warning, with a threat. Look at verse 3b.

He said, If you will not wake up, I'll come as a thief. And you will not know at what hour I will come against you. I will, Jesus, I will come as a thief.

Numerous times in the gospel, Jesus says he'll come like a thief in the night. Not because he came to steal, but because he'll come suddenly. Thieves don't knock on the door.

[22 : 11] Say, everybody ready? Take all your stuff. No, thieves come when you least expect it. And so Jesus said, I'm going to come when you're not looking. I'm going to come when you're not ready.

I'm going to see what you're doing. You know, this warning would have been very, very influential to the church in Sardis. They often thought they were safe because of their high cliffs around the walls in the city.

But twice in their history, last thousand years, twice, thieves had snuck in in the night and sacked Sardis.

So Jesus says, repent now. You don't know what hour I'll come. You must respond before it's too late.

Before the playwright George Bernard Shaw was famous, one of his plays was consistently turned down by a certain producer. Once Shaw was successful, like the way it usually works, that producer reached back out and said, hey, finally have time to produce your play.

[23 : 28] Shaw responded, better never than late. Shaw responded, better than late.

Shaw responded, better than late.

I understand effort, but is this, is the goal to pull up our bootstraps to gut out a heroic performance? Are we on our own now?

I think there's something else going on here that's meant to push us and help us. Yes, the commands are sobering and the threat is very seriously.

But the emphasis, if we look closer, is not on holding our life together, but on holding on to what we've received. They're two very different things. We're not, we're not saved by, by collecting our lives.

[25 : 12] We're saved by holding fast to what we receive. Remember, look down there in verse three. He says, remember what you received. Keep it. Keep it. What is it? Well, it is the gospel, which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Romans 1, 16 says. And so, wonderfully, while we often think mainly in the categories of the gospel being favor with God, acceptance before God, the gospel does so much more than that.

And that's what he's telling them. The gospel is not trying to just get a Sunday commitment to you, but trying to do a whole life renovation within you. Trying to bring Jesus Christ into your heart to give you a new life, a new heart, new affection, new resolve.

And so, he's saying, remember what it is that you received and hold on to it. And then notice also how Jesus introduces himself in this letter.

He introduces himself, as we said numerous times, Jesus introduces himself in a unique way to all the churches in a way that they need. To highlight something in him and in his power to underline how he can meet their needs.

[26 : 24] And look at what he says, the words of him who has the seven spirits of God. Seven is the number of perfection.

So, Jesus is saying, I have the perfect fullness of the spirit. But with everything in Jesus, Jesus is not saying, I have it. Look at me. You can have it. He is reminding us that he possesses the fullness of the spirit.

Because he is the one who sends out the spirit on the church. And what does Sardis need but the spirit of God?

The spirit who gives life. The spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead.

Who will also be with us and raise us up. I hope you see that the warnings in these commands and threats are not so we pull up our brewstrap.

[27 : 21] Not so that we gut out a gutsy performance. In a lot of ways, it aligns with what Augustine used to say. Command what you will, Lord. Give what you command.

That's the way commands are often or always supposed to be treated in scripture. And so, too, here it's meant to leave us relying on the Lord. And so, the Lord is warning us with these commands and threats that we turn to Jesus and receive the fullness of the spirit to take us all the way.

Since I dissed Martin Lloyd-Jones earlier, let me read this quote. He said, it is one thing to produce a religious man. Men can do that. A lot of churches fill with religious men and women.

But it takes the power of God and Jesus Christ to produce a Christian man. And there's no limit to that. Amen. Amen.

Throughout the history of the church, people of all kinds tell stories of deep experience with the spirit and the power of God. I remember, I mentioned it earlier, about becoming a Christian. And, you know, a couple months after getting saved, I was at a lock-in.

[28 : 28] You know, taking some kids to this lock-in. You know, nothing like a good time in lock-in. We're waiting on our first turn. It's lock-in. So I was at this lock-in and they got a couple no's back there.

But I heard someone preaching that night. And then they did an altar call. And usually my modus operandi was anytime I heard an altar call, I'd make my way down.

Because Lord knows I've done enough things lately that I need to be clean again. And yet, I said, Lord, should I go down this altar call?

And I fell suddenly seared into my heart. No, the spirit bears witness with your spirit that you are a child of God.

And that's the way it's designed to be. And so there's just things happening in my life that would not happen with human strength. And so the Lord sends his spirit. Yes, he is shocking us back to life.

[29 : 32] But shocking us so that he would beat down all the other paths of fake life and lead us to true life in Christ. Point three, the reward of godliness.

So the appearance, the path, and the reward. This letter, like all the others, concludes with a challenge and an invitation. Look at verse five. He says, the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I'll never blot his name out of the book of life.

I will confess his name before my father and before the angels. You as an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Again, this letter concludes with a challenge to cocker.

Nike. This is the way to overcome, to prevail, to be victorious. This is what's going to happen to the ones who are victorious in the end, who overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of the gospel.

They're invited to receive eternal life. I think these three things that we'll see here are underlining the eternal life that we receive. White garments.

[30 : 45] The one who conquers will be clothed in white garments. The city of Sardis was known for its wool production. Known for making beautiful garments to sell.

We already saw that. Look in verse four. He says, you have a few that have not soiled their garments. So in a city that makes garments, that was a vivid image.

They haven't dirtied their garments. They will walk with me in light, in white, for they're worthy. So Jesus says, all who conquer will be clothed in white.

White robes throughout the book of Revelation are given to those who are cleansed of all their sin and counted righteous through Jesus Christ. That's what he gives to the martyrs in Romans 6.

Revelation 6. Come, be clothed in white. Symbolizes the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the new life that he comes to bring. Look at, he continues and says, I will never blot his name out.

[31 : 51] Now, if you're fallen, this is a third reference to name in the book of Revelation, or in this letter. It's a third reference to the name in this letter.

Once you had, I love this, once you had a name and a reputation of godliness, but you were dead. But now your name is written. You who are dead, your name is written in the book of life.

Because you're alive. You know, it's just a wonderful reminder.

It ties this letter together. Now you're alive. Your name's written in the book of life. But notice that it's stated negatively. I will never blot your name out.

Now that reminds us of Exodus 32 when Moses said, blot my name out, God. If you're not going to go with this people, take me out of your book.

[32 : 51] But now God says, no. He said to Moses, I will not do that. And I will never blot your name out. Reminds me of John 6, 37.

The KJV says, all that the Father giveth to me shall come to me. And him that cometh to me, I shall in no wise cast out. It's stated negatively to beat down every fear and accusation and condemnation that might lead you to think that you're out.

So John Bunyan, in his book, the welcome to Jesus, he says, but I am a sinner, say you.

I will in no wise cast out, says Christ. But I am an old sinner, say you. I will in no wise cast out, says Christ.

But I am a hard-hearted sinner, say you. I will in no wise cast out. But I am a backsliding sinner, say you. I will in no wise cast out, says Christ.

[34 : 03] But I have served Satan all my days, say you. I will in no wise cast out, says Christ. But I have sinned against the light, say you. I will in no wise cast out, says Christ.

But I've sinned against mercy, say you. I will in no wise cast out. But I have no good thing to bring with me, say you. I will in no wise cast out.

What are you saying? Aligns with this. Remember what you received. Hold it to the end. I'll never cast you out.

It's a precious truth. Unlike the devil, the Lord never accuses us again of forgiven sin.

That's what's going on. He's saying, like you're not accepted into my family because of how hard and how fast you held on to these things.

[35 : 18] But because you confess Jesus Christ and the Lord never accuses those who confess him. So I offer you the Lord Jesus Christ this morning. I offer you the gift of life.

You who may have a reputation, I pray that you might have a reputation. But the question is, do you have life in your bones? Do you have the comfort and the assurance that you belong to Christ?

If not, I invite you to come. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. And so wonderfully he says, I will never blot your name out. Fourth reference to the name.

He says, I will confess your name. Before my father. Another reference to the name reminds us of Matthew 10, 32.

So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my father who's in heaven. It's striking to see this together. You know, on the one hand, wonderfully, Jesus says, I will not blot your name out, but also he says, I will confess your name before my father in heaven.

[36 : 24] I will give all that you need to gain entrance into my heaven. And so we anticipate it with great joy.

And we fight for it with all our might. Several weeks ago, I told the story of a man converted under Martin Lloyd-Jones' ministry called Staffordshire Bill.

You probably remember, or hopefully you remember. If not, you can check it out. A man who was a town drunk in the town of Aberfan. A foul man. Very few moral standards and a filthy mouth.

He's converted and is late in his life, three years before he died. Converted under the preaching of Martin Lloyd-Jones.

He was known as Staffordshire Bill. I guess it's kind of a name for that guy who's always around getting drunk. And he said he's no longer going by that name anymore. Going by William Thomas.

[37 : 31] But as I kept reading the book, they kept telling more about William's life and about those three years.

On the one hand, Bill or William was never the same. But on the other hand, that change didn't come quickly.

He felt guilty for all that he'd done. He felt condemned for every misstep. They would say he couldn't even find his socks in the house without swearing about the socks hiding from him.

A number of times, he showed up at Lloyd-Jones' house in the middle of the night, early in the morning, and declaring that he was too wretched, too hopeless, and too far gone to be a Christian.

Nevertheless, Lloyd-Jones continually proclaimed to him the gospel, called him to trust in grace, promised him that was grace enough for him. He was an old man but a spiritual babe fighting to live.

[38 : 40] And yet, for three years, he fought among the church and it was finally time for him to depart this life. They called Dr. Lloyd-Jones over because he had a high fever and labored breathing.

He was suffering from double pneumonia. And as they sat with him, they were startled by watching the Lord receive the least of these into his heavens.

He said, and I quote, William Thomas was far away somewhere but responded to a greeting and a prayer by us.

He was obviously at perfect peace and all the evidences of his old, sinful, violent life were smoothed out with a now childlike face.

The minutes passed and became an hour and more and suddenly the painful sound of the difficult breathing seemed to stop and the old man's face was transformed, a light, radiant.

[39 : 54] He sat up eagerly with upstretched arms and a beautiful smile on his face as though welcoming his best of friends.

And with that, we're gone to the land of pure delight where saints in immortal sing. May God help us to press on to a deep, a real, spirit-powered life.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you the privilege of sitting under these things and wrestling with these things. Pray that you would cause your word to have its intended effect to produce in us that which is pleasing in your sight.

Oh Lord, our rock and redeemer, help us and keep us, we pray. in Jesus' name, Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.